

New Stories of
THE MYSTERIOUS WAYS OF

WANG FOO

IV.—The Coral Button

CRACKLE! Crackles! Crackles! Bang! Bang! went the fire-crackers which the coolies were carrying in front of the wedding sedan-chair proceeding along Queen's Road in Hong Kong. It was such a common every-day occurrence that outside of the usual pleasant sensations associated with the noise and the fire and the smoke, it did not attract any very special attention from the native passers-by, but two European gentlemen, evidently out for an afternoon stroll, stopped to comment upon it.

"Sounds mighty like the old-fashioned Fourth of July at home doesn't it?" remarked Capt. Harold Westinghouse, the newly-arrived Consul from the United States, to Captain John R. Marshall, late of New Bedford, Mass., and now acting agent for the American river-steamer to Canton.

"It surely does," replied the latter, "and you notice that the Chinese small boy takes just about as much delight in it as the American one used to do; though I suppose the newly-arrived Consul from the United States, to Captain John R. Marshall, late of New Bedford, Mass., and now acting agent for the American river-steamer to Canton."

"They don't seem to scrimp themselves at all; why, that fellow must have a half dozen packs tied on to the end of the fish-poles there, and he is setting them all off—one right after the other."

"Yes, and besides the little fellows, you see he's got a lot of those big cannon-crackers tied in with the bunch. They're the ones that make the lin-rik-sha pullers jump when they go off in the middle of the street."

"I wonder what the real idea of the thing is, anyhow? It can't be just simply to make a noise. The Chinese are too thrifty and prudent and saving to waste any of their hard-earned money just on an empty noise. You mark my words, there's a philosophy in their madness. I believe these hardened people have some theory about it that you and I don't understand at all."

"Oh, I suppose it's on the same principle as the joss-money they buy and throw overboard every time the ship starts. It helps to give good luck for the voyage and to keep the devil away. I asked our ship's comrade about it a trip or two ago. Says I to him: 'Ah Sam, what for Chitaman he throw all that joss-paper in the sea every time ship sails, eh?' 'Blonge vally good joss,' says he; 'Chinese talkies plenty places devotions of air in sea vally well. Hurry! He watches chow-chow lice but no got cash, suppose he no pay him plenty paper money, debbil vally anly sende plenty wind and rain and makes that sea vally tough. Ship no can go prooper, saveet!'"

"Oh, I see," said the Consul, with a smile. "It's just a kind of a fair weather insurance, as we would say."

"Ten that's about the size of it," replied the skipper. "These hobgoblins—or whatever they are that they be—live in—say to these poor dupees: 'Here now, you pay up so much cash before you start, or we'll make it mighty unpleasant for you when this ship gets out to sea.'"

"But of course it isn't real money they throw overboard?"

"Not on your life. It's just this cheap counterfeit stuff you see them selling in the shops. You can get about five hundred dollars worth of it for ten cents, my boy tell me."

"And do you think the devils in the air don't know the difference between this and real money?"

"That's what it looks like. But that's only one of the many ways they have of fooling them. However, it's too big a subject for you and me to attempt to unravel. We should try to get at the inside or any of the stories. We'd be out of our heads before we knew it. I just leave them alone and simply say, 'Joss Pidgin, and that covers it all.'

"Yes, even in the short time I've lived here, I've discovered that Joss Pidgin covers almost everything the European doesn't understand about the strange religious ways of this people. But, see! Here comes just the man that can tell us all about it!"

extending his hand in a cordial welcome to Mr. Wang Foo, the famous Chinese detective—"we'll refer the whole matter to him for explanation. Mr. Wang," said the Captain, "I never just talked about fire-crackers without wondering what the real secret of their constant use and popularity among the Chinese is. There's no subject connected with your people that you cannot enlighten us poor Westerners upon and we will feel grateful for any light you can throw on this."

"Delighted to serve you in any way that I can, gentlemen," replied their Chinese guest in his usual cordial and very courteous manner, "but don't stop here right in the road. Across the way is the tea-hong of my old friends Long Tuck & Co.; they have a broad and spacious veranda there at our disposal; let us sit down and be comfortable."

When they had found three comfortable rattan chairs on the cool brick veranda and had sipped the tea which Long Tuck & Co.'s compradores placed before them, Wang Foo opened his cigar-

APPLE BLOSSOMS

By M. QUAD Copyright, 1919, by the McClure Newspaper Syndicate.

On her eighteenth birthday, May Ainsley had her photograph taken.

She was not only a good-looking girl, but rather romantic and so had prepared for an extra photograph. The photographer also had prepared at her expense. He had sketched an apple tree in blossom and, as she sat to have her picture taken, she had a wreath of apple blossoms around her head.

Miss May was to call in a week for her pictures.

The pictures were ready in a big envelope, and Miss May bore them

arrete case and offered each of his friends a roll of the famous old English "Three Castles".

"You are inquiring about the philosophy of the fire-cracker," he began.

"Well, gentlemen, to be candid with you, there is a certain philosophy about it, though we hardly ever dignify by that name. The theory—if the theory I may call it—is simply this: the Chinese believe that the air about them is filled with all sorts of little spirits that float about like tiny insects in the atmosphere and have to be supplied with food and clothing and the necessities of life just as if they were material creatures of flesh and blood. In addition to the ordinary tribute which they expect from all passers-by upon the streets, they levy special taxes, as it were, upon all special occasions, such as festive processions, weddings, funerals, etc. This is what the people resent and the fire-cracker is their means of showing it and of securing immunity from the unjust demands. Whenever a procession starts down the street, the spirit folk are called out to blow the bugle. This means that they must be got rid of and pushed to one side and the fire-cracker does it most effectively by stunning them with its short, sharp report, and rendering them temporarily powerless, thus clearing the road and the air and allowing the procession to pass in peace."

"You mean the crackers knock these little demons senseless, but don't actually kill them? Is that the idea, Mr. Wang?"

"Precisely so."

"Well," interrupted the Consul, "what are the big crackers for? I see that they are very now and then they set off one of these."

"Ah, that brings up a very interesting point," replied the host, as he leaned over and deposited his cigarettes ash on the tray, "regarding the organization of the forces of the invisible world. In the religion of the Western world, as the soldiers are in the native army. They are similar to the grades in the armies of Imperial Rome, having their hundred men under a centurion and their thousand men under a chiliarch. Now inasmuch as an officer is much more important and valuable than a private, it will naturally require—so the people reason—a larger and stronger fire-cracker to stun him. That is why at every hundredth cracker they insert a large one to stun the centurion and at every thousand a still larger one to stun the chiliarch."

"So they really knock the whole regiment down flat, do they not? Officers, privates and all?" And when they recovered consciousness again it's too late to catch them. That's the idea, is it not?"

"Exactly so. And that explains why they do not set them off in the little square packs that you use in America. Those are only made for export; we do not use them here. Those 'fish-poles' as you call them, enable us to hang a whole string of crackers in the air and weave in the officers in their proper rank and places. That is why we call it 'Tang Pieh' or 'cracking the whip,' don't you see? Now, tell me how many American boys who use fire-crackers have ever heard of the Chinese idea of using them?"

"Not one in fifty thousand. Mr. Wang," replied his friends in unison, as they rose to depart and thanked him for his explanation.

The Consul drew forth from his pocket a handsome silver cigarette case and, offering one of its perfumed Turkish rolls to the detective, said as he did so, "I want you to try one of these, sir; they are the very genuine thing, just arrived from the sacred city of Macao, the capital of the famous tobacco manufacturers in the city of Macao."

"I must confess it is too much for me," remarked the Consul as he shook his head. "Please point it out to me."

"Why, don't you see that one is right and one is left, just like a pair of shoes? Look at this one: the coral is on the right, isn't it? Now look at the other: the coral is on the left."

"So it is. Why, it's strange I didn't notice that in the first place. How did you happen to catch your eye, Mr. Wang?"

"Well, you see it struck me as rather unusual that the two cases should be so very much alike, and knowing that when that happens, it is nearly always because they are rights and lefts, I once suspected that these were two separate parts of the one whole. If I placed them together now—suiting the action to the word—you will notice that they open like a hinge, as we say in the poetic East, like the two corresponding shells upon the sea-shore."

"You mean, then, that these are really parts of one set? In a word,

they belong together and should never have been sold separately, sir?"

"Of course that sort of sentiment doesn't appeal very much to the average tourist mind, but no Chinese—and I may say, no Japanese, either—ever would have knowingly separated them. There is a deep and mysterious significance in the symbol of the double shells which nature has joined together and ill-luck nearly always follows the man who attempts to separate them. Perhaps some day when you have a little leisure, I may be able to explain this to you more in detail. We haven't time to go into it now."

"Good afternoon, then, Mr. Wang, and thank you again for giving me a very interesting tale to tell Mrs. Westinghouse when I reach home. She will take a special delight in hearing all about it, for you see she gave me that cigarette-case for a present last Christmas morning."

"You don't happen to remember just where she bought it, do you—but that is hardly a courteous question for me to ask—"

"Oh, that's all right, as long as our curiosity is aroused—why, I suppose she bought it at one of those Cantonese shops in Queen's Road, where she usually goes. At any rate, I'll ask her tonight and drop you a line if you care to know."

"I should appreciate it most highly, sir," remarked Wang Foo, as he shook the Consul's and the Captain's hands and bade them the politest "Good afternoon."

The next morning a uniformed messenger with the chit-book of the Amer-

ican Consulate knocked at the outer gate of No. 8-10 in the Alley of the Red Cloud, just off the Avenue of Fragrant Waters. Old Chang, the gate-keeper, admitted him, bowed him to a seat, produced the tea and pipes and, after a few preliminary greetings, took the message and delivered it to Wang Foo in the upper chamber. The latter opened it and read as follows:

"Consulate of the United States, Hong Kong.
My dear Mr. Wang:

Afterwards the silver cigarette-case about which we were talking yesterday, I find that Mrs. Westinghouse purchased it from a silver dealer who came to the Consulate one day and exhibited his wares in the drawing-room. He claimed to represent one of the largest establishments in the Colony, but, strange to say, she has never been able to locate him. She inquired of all the servants, but none of them remembered seeing him before.

"So it is. Why, it's strange I didn't notice that in the first place. How did you happen to catch your eye, Mr. Wang?"

"Well, you see it struck me as rather unusual that the two cases should be so very much alike, and knowing that when that happens, it is nearly always because they are rights and lefts, I once suspected that these were two separate parts of the one whole. If I placed them together now—suiting the action to the word—you will notice that they open like a hinge, as we say in the poetic East, like the two corresponding shells upon the sea-shore."

"You mean, then, that these are really parts of one set? In a word,

he laid it down upon the table, signed the chit-book and returned it to the messenger. Then, closing the door, he took out of his desk-drawer the cigarette-case and holding it up said to himself as he lighted one of the "Three Castles": "So, So! The left-hand silver shell with its half of the sacred coral button was sold to the Consul's wife by an unknown dealer, was it? That makes a most interesting link in the chain. The old Abbot and I will have a very pleasant evening together."

"Wang Foo had been over the August commandos," was the Secret-

ary. "We must be silent and sagacious as the sages say before fixing our suspicion upon anyone. You understand me and promise to obey?"

"The humblest crystal ladder bows to his venerable father's wishes. May the King of Hades, who punishes all disloyal ones on earth, grind me to ten thousand grains of powder in his mortar if either hand or tongue disobeys the august commandos!"

"Wang Foo had been over the August commandos," was the Secret-

ary. "We must be silent and sagacious as the sages say before fixing our suspicion upon anyone. You understand me and promise to obey?"

"The humblest crystal ladder bows to his venerable father's wishes. May the King of Hades, who punishes all disloyal ones on earth, grind me to ten thousand grains of powder in his mortar if either hand or tongue disobeys the august commandos!"

"Wang Foo had been over the August commandos," was the Secret-

ary. "We must be silent and sagacious as the sages say before fixing our suspicion upon anyone. You understand me and promise to obey?"

"The humblest crystal ladder bows to his venerable father's wishes. May the King of Hades, who punishes all disloyal ones on earth, grind me to ten thousand grains of powder in his mortar if either hand or tongue disobeys the august commandos!"

"Wang Foo had been over the August commandos," was the Secret-

ary. "We must be silent and sagacious as the sages say before fixing our suspicion upon anyone. You understand me and promise to obey?"

"The humblest crystal ladder bows to his venerable father's wishes. May the King of Hades, who punishes all disloyal ones on earth, grind me to ten thousand grains of powder in his mortar if either hand or tongue disobeys the august commandos!"

"Wang Foo had been over the August commandos," was the Secret-

ary. "We must be silent and sagacious as the sages say before fixing our suspicion upon anyone. You understand me and promise to obey?"

"The humblest crystal ladder bows to his venerable father's wishes. May the King of Hades, who punishes all disloyal ones on earth, grind me to ten thousand grains of powder in his mortar if either hand or tongue disobeys the august commandos!"

"Wang Foo had been over the August commandos," was the Secret-

ary. "We must be silent and sagacious as the sages say before fixing our suspicion upon anyone. You understand me and promise to obey?"

"The humblest crystal ladder bows to his venerable father's wishes. May the King of Hades, who punishes all disloyal ones on earth, grind me to ten thousand grains of powder in his mortar if either hand or tongue disobeys the august commandos!"

"Wang Foo had been over the August commandos," was the Secret-

ary. "We must be silent and sagacious as the sages say before fixing our suspicion upon anyone. You understand me and promise to obey?"

"The humblest crystal ladder bows to his venerable father's wishes. May the King of Hades, who punishes all disloyal ones on earth, grind me to ten thousand grains of powder in his mortar if either hand or tongue disobeys the august commandos!"

"Wang Foo had been over the August commandos," was the Secret-

ary. "We must be silent and sagacious as the sages say before fixing our suspicion upon anyone. You understand me and promise to obey?"

"The humblest crystal ladder bows to his venerable father's wishes. May the King of Hades, who punishes all disloyal ones on earth, grind me to ten thousand grains of powder in his mortar if either hand or tongue disobeys the august commandos!"

"Wang Foo had been over the August commandos," was the Secret-

ary. "We must be silent and sagacious as the sages say before fixing our suspicion upon anyone. You understand me and promise to obey?"

"The humblest crystal ladder bows to his venerable father's wishes. May the King of Hades, who punishes all disloyal ones on earth, grind me to ten thousand grains of powder in his mortar if either hand or tongue disobeys the august commandos!"

"Wang Foo had been over the August commandos," was the Secret-

ary. "We must be silent and sagacious as the sages say before fixing our suspicion upon anyone. You understand me and promise to obey?"

"The humblest crystal ladder bows to his venerable father's wishes. May the King of Hades, who punishes all disloyal ones on earth, grind me to ten thousand grains of powder in his mortar if either hand or tongue disobeys the august commandos!"

"Wang Foo had been over the August commandos," was the Secret-

ary. "We must be silent and sagacious as the sages say before fixing our suspicion upon anyone. You understand me and promise to obey?"

"The humblest crystal ladder bows to his venerable father's wishes. May the King of Hades, who punishes all disloyal ones on earth, grind me to ten thousand grains of powder in his mortar if either hand or tongue disobeys the august commandos!"

"Wang Foo had been over the August commandos," was the Secret-

ary. "We must be silent and sagacious as the sages say before fixing our suspicion upon anyone. You understand me and promise to obey?"

"The humblest crystal ladder bows to his venerable father's wishes. May the King of Hades, who punishes all disloyal ones on earth, grind me to ten thousand grains of powder in his mortar if either hand or tongue disobeys the august commandos!"

"Wang Foo had been over the August commandos," was the Secret-

ary. "We must be silent and sagacious as the sages say before fixing our suspicion upon anyone. You understand me and promise to obey?"

"The humblest crystal ladder bows to his venerable father's wishes. May the King of Hades, who punishes all disloyal ones on earth, grind me to ten thousand grains of powder in his mortar if either hand or tongue disobeys the august commandos!"

"Wang Foo had been over the August commandos," was the Secret-

ary. "We must be silent and sagacious as the sages say before fixing our suspicion upon anyone. You understand me and promise to obey?"

"The